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Legal Aid offices merge

Dayton, Lima, Toledo agencies combine

By Rob Modic

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DAYTON | The Legal Aid Society of Dayton is merging with legal aid groups in Lima and Toledo to form an organization of attorneys for the poor that will be based in Toledo and serve 30 counties in northwest and west-central Ohio.

The merger will mean a reduction in staff at Dayton's legal aid offices from 26 to 17 positions, but efficiency moves will actually increase the capacity of the organizations to serve more clients, officials said Monday.

The merger reflects a five-year trend of reductions in federal funding and added restrictions upon the agencies that take those funds, said Gary J. Weston, executive director of the Legal Aid Society of Dayton.

"In larger agencies covering larger areas, certain efficiencies are positive and this new plan will bring that to life," Weston said.

The merger will also envelop the Greater Dayton Volunteer Lawyers Project Inc., a program supported by the Dayton Bar Association and legal aid in Dayton.

The three merging legal aid groups will provide government-funded legal aid through the Toledo organization, called Legal Services of Northwest Ohio. Its executive director, Kevin Mulder, will lead the merged organization.

The agencies also will pool their extra projects in a second, affiliated nonprofit agency called Advocates for Basic Legal Equality Inc., which is not funded by the Legal Services Corporation and does not face the restrictions that come with the federal funds. Such extra projects include challenges to utility deregulation, military disposal of toxic substances and predatory lending.

ABLE also provides free legal services in civil matters to low-income individuals, families and groups in northwest Ohio. Joseph R. Tafelski is its executive director.

"ABLE remains dedicated to its original purpose of legal advocacy to promote systemic changes that benefit large groups of low-income people," an agency statement said.

"ABLE provides legal services through three divisions: the Special Litigation and Support Unit, the Regional Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program, and Legal Aid Line of Northwest Ohio."

The merger has been approved by the executive directors and boards of trustees of each of the agencies, Mulder and Tafelski said.

Weston said he will be stepping down after 17 years heading the Dayton agency and will not take a job with the merged organization.

"This is a good time for me to do some other things," Weston said, indicating he will continue working until the merger is completed this year.

The merger brings the pair of Toledo agencies, with combined funding of \$4.8 million, together with \$1.8 million anticipated from the Dayton area and \$1.1 million from two offices in Lima and Springfield. Dayton had \$1.7 million in 2002 and \$2.35 million in 2001 to serve clients only in Montgomery County. The \$1.8 million allocated next year for the Dayton office will be used to serve Montgomery, Preble, Greene and Darke counties, Mulder and Tafelski said.

The Toledo agency's 24-member board will be expanded to include six members each from the agencies in Lima and Dayton. Administrative support for the organization will be housed within ABLE in Toledo, which already provides administrative support for itself and Legal Services of Northwest Ohio.

The merger is expected to begin soon and decisions on who will remain and who will leave will be completed by October, said Patty Robb, spokeswoman for Legal Services of Northwest Ohio.

In all, the organization will have offices in Toledo, Lima, Dayton and Springfield. To be closed are small offices in Bellefontaine, Eaton, Troy, Van Wert and Xenia, Mulder and Tafelski said.

A full-time position will be created in the Dayton office to concentrate on raising funds for the Dayton, Lima and Springfield offices. Funding from individuals, United Way agencies, private and government grants, and contracts may be designated for use in a specific county.

Mulder and Tafelski said their organizations raised \$2 million in donations, and government and private agency contracts and grants. That compares with about \$450,000 raised by the Dayton agency. If additional funds are raised in the Dayton area, it will be used to increase staff here, they said.

The name of the Lima organization will be dropped and the Toledo agency's name may change, Robb said. "An effort will be made to continue to use the name 'Legal Aid Society of Dayton' in some way," Tafelski said.

At the heart of the reorganization will be a new phone system — Legal Aid Line — that was pioneered by the Toledo organization and has proven to make legal aid attorneys more efficient in serving clients.

In Toledo, Legal Aid Line uses four attorneys and four intake workers to service 15 counties. With the additional 15 counties, the Legal Aid Line staff will be increased to nine attorneys and nine intake workers, with probably two of the attorneys and a pair of intake workers based in Dayton, Mulder and Tafelski said.

Attorneys will travel from county to county, meeting with clients by appointments set up through the phone system, Robb said.

The Toledo-based agencies serve 15 counties in northwest Ohio: Crawford, Defiance, Erie, Fulton, Hancock, Henry, Huron, Lucas, Ottawa, Paulding, Sandusky, Seneca, Williams, Wood and Wyandot.

The Lima and Dayton agencies serve these 15 counties: Allen, Auglaize, Champaign, Clark, Darke, Greene, Hardin, Logan, Mercer, Miami, Montgomery, Preble, Putnam, Shelby and Van Wert.